Vicksburg National Military Park

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Vicksburg National Military Park

It's Bad to Belong to Folks That Own You Body and Soul

The situation of blacks in America is a unique one. No other group to come here from a foreign continent was so completely torn away from its roots, and no other group had to endure slavery.

The harshness of slavery went far beyond cruel punishments and living and working conditions. Every part of a slave's life was controlled. Children could be taken from their parents and sold or handled in any way the master - not the parents - saw fit. Slaves had no rights in matters that we take for granted today - education, religion, free speech. Enslavement stripped black people of their fundamental human dignity and stifled their complete development, depriving them of the possibility of achieving their ultimate dreams and aspirations.

The "War for Freedom"


Negroes for Sale.

Thirty Seasoned Negroes

Approximately a quarter million free blacks lived in the slave states, while a little over 200,000 resided in the free states. As free blacks they may not have been owned, but their civil liberties scarcely resembled those of white people. They were free, but not equal. They tended to hold inferior jobs, receive inadequate education, and could vote in only a handful of states. Free blacks who resided in the slave states had even fewer civil liberties. Southern whites viewed them with suspicion, looking at them as instigators and leaders of slave protests and rebellions. Once sectional tensions mounted, whites in the slave states kept a careful eye on free blacks.

As the Union army penetrated deeper into Southern territory in the Civil War, huge numbers of black refugees fled to Union lines. Some sought protection from the ravages of war; most, however, hoped that this was the "War for Freedom." They arrived in wagons, on horseback, and on foot, and many came merely with the tattered clothing on their backs.

For slaves, flight to the North was a risky proposition. Beatings, whippings, mutilation, and sometimes murder awaited the unlucky runaways who were caught. By the war's end, however, estimates of between 500,000 and 700,000 slaves escaped to the Yankees.

Precedent supported black admission into the armed forces. In the American Revolution, black soldiers fought valiantly in the Continental army. During the War of 1812, men of African descent fought most conspicuously alongside Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans. More importantly, black men had already secured entry into the United States Navy, and as this was predominantly a ground war, it was in the army that black men had to make their mark. No one was more aware of that fact than Frederick Douglass who harangued the Lincoln administration for its unwillingness to admit African Americans into the Federal army.

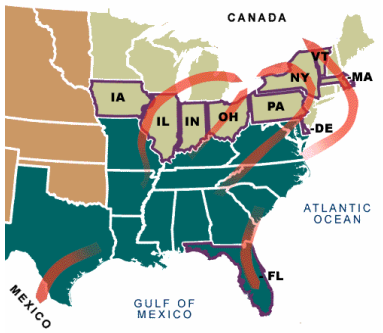
When the war had reached such magnitude that a true reunion of the states without the destruction of slavery was impossible, the President acted.

A Nation Divided

During the decades preceding the Civil War, no issue more divided and plagued the people of the United States than slavery. Even among those who had doubts about its morality, slavery was debated as part of a complex set of interlocking philosophical, social, economic, and political concerns too difficult to resolve and too intertwined with the fate of the nation to consider abolishing.

Yet, in the midst of such moral confusion and political failure, black Americans, slave and free, aided by white allies, operated an illegal network determined to strike at slavery by helping those trapped in bondage. The Underground Railroad served the nation as the exacting conscience of the most important reform movement in U.S. history - purging the land of slavery.

The Underground Railroad

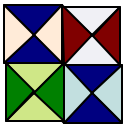


The Underground Railroad is one of American history's mysterious creations. It eventually adopted such terms as *"conductors," "stations," "routes," "cargoes," "packages,"* and *"passengers."* Sharing nothing more than the language and imagery with the steam technology of the day, the Underground Railroad is one of history's finest symbols of the struggle against oppression.

The movement of freedom-seeking slaves resists precise characterization even though it functioned from the founding of the Republic through the terrible bloodletting of the Civil War. It involved lone individuals and entire communities, devised bold methods of escape, and was the scene of great human triumphs and awful disappointments. But at its center it embodied the nation's leading principle: the quest for freedom.

A Story of Secrets

This pattern is known as Bow Tie, Hourglass, and Pinwheel, all created from one unit. The Hourglass is vertical, the Bow Tie horizontal, and the Pinwheel is the pattern hidden in the center of the design.



The Drunkard's Path pattern was believed to encourage the slaves to follow a zigzag path. This may have been a connection to the African superstition that evil only travels in a straight line. Also interesting was the fact that safe houses were staggered for protective reasons as well.

Morning Star/Evening Star - Since slaves were told to follow the North Star, many nineteenth-century quilts contained star images.

It was believed that when the Tumbling Blocks pattern appeared, it was the signal that the time had come for the slaves to gather their belongings and escape.

The story of the Underground Railroad is a story of secrets, involving routes and language, codes and music - cunning systems of visual and oral communication, known only to those involved and reflecting the indomitable spirit of a people's resistance and desire to be free. Codes took the form of spirituals, dance, and symbols committed to memory. Although few of these codes are documented, one, said to be designed by slaves, was the *"Quilt Code"* - use of quilts as visual maps to freedom.

The Quilt Code lends itself to conjecture, and exactly how the code was used is not known. Theory has it that the patterns in the code were used to aid slaves in memorizing directives before leaving the plantation. The names of quilt patterns functioned as metaphors in the code - the patterns representing certain meanings. Patterns used in the code included: *Log Cabin, Bow Ties, Double Wedding Rings, Flying Geese, Drunkard's Path,* and *Tumbling Boxes*.

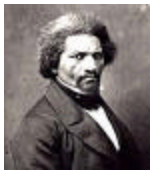
Another code is said to involve the role of the blacksmith on the plantation. The skill of African-American blacksmiths was very respected by both the black and white communities, and in the antebellum South, intricate wrought-iron work was linked to the owner's wealth and prestige. Was the plantation blacksmith a mere skilled laborer, or, as is suspected, was he the dispatcher of information using the anvil and hammer to ring out messages? Did the anvil, hammer, and bellows replace the talking drums when they were outlawed? When "loaned out" to other plantations, the blacksmith most likely used the opportunity to collect geographical information and his cleverness and importance were hidden under the guise of strenuous hard labor.

Blacksmith's Anvil

Southern Icons

Harriet Tubman stands out as the icon of the Underground Railroad. She was born into slavery about 1820 in Maryland. Originally named Araminta Ross, she was called Harriet by her owner. In danger of being sold away from her husband, John Tubman, and her extended family, Harriet escaped alone in 1848 to Philadelphia. She returned to Maryland's Eastern Shore area about 20 times and led more than 300 runaways to freedom. During the Civil War, she returned to the United States from Saint Catharines, Canada, where she had settled, and served in the Union Army as a nurse, spy, and scout. Harriet Tubman died in 1913 at age 93.

Harriet Tubman



Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass was born into slavery in 1818 in Maryland, and given the name Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey. Fleeing slavery in 1838, he settled in New Bedford, MA. Using his eloquent oratorical and journalistic skills, he became the most famous 19th century black abolitionist, lecturing for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, and producing a newspaper, the North Star, later titled Frederick Douglass' Newspaper. He argued for immediate abolition of slavery, and helped many fugitives escape to freedom. During the Civil War, he campaigned for the rights of blacks to enlist in the Union Army, and was consulted about racial issues by President Lincoln. In 1872, Douglass moved to Washington, DC, serving as publisher of the New National Era, intended to carry forward the work of elevating the position of African-Americans in the post-Emancipation period. The enterprise was discontinued when promised financial backing failed to materialize. Douglass also served briefly as President of the Freedmen's National Bank, and subsequently in various national service positions, including U.S. Marshal for the District of Columbia, and diplomatic positions in Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

Sojourner Truth was an evangelistic orator who preached emancipation and women's suffrage. She was born a slave named Isabella Baumfree about 1797 in Hurley, NY. She first gained fame suing for the return of a son who had been illegally sold. Though she could neither read nor write, she was a compelling speaker at abolitionist meetings in the late 1840's, as she evoked the Bible and religious principles. She changed her name in 1843 *"because I was to declare truth unto people."* In 1850, she began speaking on women's suffrage, and her most famous speech, *"Ain't I A Woman?,"* was presented in 1851 at a women's rights convention in Ohio.

During the Civil War she raised food and clothing contributions for black regiments, and met Abraham Lincoln at the White House in 1864. After the war, she again spoke widely, advocating for some time a "Negro State" in the west. She spoke mainly to white audiences, mostly on religion, "Negro" and women's rights, and temperance. Active until 1875, she returned to Michigan where she died in 1883 and was buried in Battle Creek.

Sojourner Truth